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THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH GRAMMAR¹

FOR some years I have been confident that a revival of the study of English grammar was certain to come. There are two reasons for my confidence. The first is the importance of the subject itself. The second is the fact that some years ago the pendulum of educational thought began to swing away from the teaching of grammar, and its return is as certain as the operation of natural law.

I recognize that the figure which I have just used is not perfect. The pendulum of educational progress obeys no merely physical law. It will not swing back to the same position occupied before. Nor can any one be more heartily glad of this than I. What has been gained for the systematic teaching of composition and literature will not, I trust, be lost. Besides, the older grammatical teaching must give way to something more accurate, more interesting, and more effective. Let me try to point out some of the lines along which this newer grammatical teaching should proceed.

In the first place, English grammar should be taught with more reference to the nature of language and the principles of its development. That this has been done to any considerable extent in the past, no one who knows the subject intimately will seriously maintain. The teaching of English grammar has usually been little more than the presentation, in the least interesting form, of certain dogmatic statements laid down by various

¹ Paper read before the Michigan Schoolmasters' Club, Nov., 1896.

so-called grammarians—I will not take their names in vain, for I am sure they have been well-meaning, though often ignorant men. The basis for these dogmatic statements and rules, their relation to language as it exists and has existed, the reason for the discrepant dogmatisms of different treatises, have had too little consideration in grammatical study. In fine, the teaching of the grammar of our mother tongue has been almost, if not quite, untouched by the newer discussions and discoveries in the science of language.

The importance of considering language in its essential nature may be illustrated from the division of the parts of speech. The separation of the elements of language into parts of speech, as they are called, was originally based mainly on inflection. But in an analytical language like our own the classification based on inflection is no longer exclusive, and the tendency is to make a somewhat new division based on function alone. Thus such “parts of speech” as the participle and the article have been set up. Yet division according to function, if fully carried out, would greatly multiply the categories, and this is disadvantageous on many accounts. The only feasible course seems to be to preserve the older classification based on inflection, in order to make clear the relation of English to its past history as well as to other languages. On the other hand, the importance of function should be emphasized, so that the student may appreciate the conventional, rather than essential, character of the division. Unfortunately, the grammarians have not only adopted various functional classifications, but have stated them categorically without the slightest hint of their conventional character. The result is confusion in the mind of the student in regard to both his own language and the foreign languages with which he comes in contact.

To illustrate by a concrete example, there is no greater confusion in grammatical categories, as they appear in most textbooks, than in those called adjectives and pronouns. There is naturally some reason for this. In many languages the terms adjective and pronoun are not exclusive divisions. Certain

classes of pronouns, as demonstratives and indefinites, always have adjective as well as pronominal functions. Some indefinites also have adjective inflection. Besides, in English such pronouns have lost all trace of inflection, agreeing in this respect with adjectives. It is not strange, therefore, that there should be some confusion of ideas. It is strange that the grammarian, whose special business is to note essential distinctions, should separate English grammar from that of all other languages by classing demonstrative and indefinite pronouns under adjectives. No one would maintain for a moment that these classes of pronouns are any less pronominal than in the past.

Again, English grammar should not be filled up with a mixture of logical and grammatical distinctions. If used at all, logical distinctions should not be emphasized at the expense of those which are strictly grammatical. For example, number and case are grammatical distinctions in nouns and pronouns, as are number and person in verbs. But common and proper, abstract and concrete, are logical terms, having no important relation to grammar. Even gender, as applied to nouns, is more of a logical than a grammatical distinction in English. Similarly, descriptive and definitive as applied to adjectives relate principally to thought, and as ordinarily used have but slight relation to grammar itself.

Even grammatical distinctions are not clearly made. Let me illustrate from the use of the term *case* in English grammar. It is not now my intention to refer to the great diversity in the number of so-called cases in the various text-books, although these emphasize the confusion of thought in regard to the subject. Let me now point out another source of confusion. The term *case* in most pronouns refers primarily to form; but in nouns it refers to both form and function, while in some pronouns, as the indefinites, it refers exclusively to function. In particular, the term "objective case," itself a most unfortunate one as far as syntax is concerned, refers to form in the case of the personal pronouns, but exclusively to function in the case of nouns and other pronouns. Besides, even in the

case of pronouns, the term "objective" case confuses two important syntactical functions, those of the dative and accusative.

Such confusion in the use of terms, due to lack of clear conception of the nature of language, terribly hampers the teaching of English grammar, and throws teacher and pupil back upon mere dogmatic statement. There is nothing left but the dry and deadening processes of memorizing rules and definitions, and the unreasoning application of set formulæ.

Further, owing to misconceptions of language, our text-books of English grammar show an entire neglect of some fundamental distinctions. In an inflected language, syntactical relations are made evident by inflectional endings. How are syntactical relations shown in an analytical language like English? Manifestly, first, by certain relational words, as prepositions and auxiliary verbs, and, second, by the order of words. Now I know of no grammar of English which begins to do justice to the syntactical importance of prepositions. Certainly there is none which attempts to treat word order in any adequate manner. Yet these are fundamental facts of English syntax, more important than all the logical distinctions with which our text-books are filled.

One other point is of first importance. The teaching of English grammar should take account of the fundamental principles of linguistic development. The teacher should know and emphasize the fact that grammar is the description of a more or less unstable and changing medium of expression; that language is not hedged about by any divinity, but is merely a human institution, subject to human infirmity and human caprice; that what is grammatically correct in one age may not be in the next; that changes in language proceed along certain lines and under certain influences, a full understanding of which could not fail to make the study of grammatical relations more interesting and more effective. I emphasize this, because even the newer text-books produced on this side of the Atlantic show slight traces of the enormous advances made during recent years in

the science of language. The text-books of English grammar used in German schools are far more systematic and careful treatments of the subject than most of those used in England or America.

So far some of the relations of English grammar to the nature of language have been emphasized. In the next place, the subject should be taught with respect to the historical development of the language. I am making no attempt to outline a graded course of instruction. Of course, only the most elementary descriptive grammar can be taught in the lower schools. But historical relations of English should certainly have a place in the high school. Above all, teachers of English of every grade should be qualified to introduce the most scholarly instruction possible at every suitable time.

No doubt this will be theoretically accepted by all. Practically, however, so far as I have been able to learn, historical English grammar is not taught in the schools. One fact incidentally confirms me in this opinion. Some years ago, a prominent teacher of English in one of our best secondary schools urged an historical acquaintance with the language in a paper which has been somewhat widely circulated. Unfortunately, most of the books recommended as helpful to the teacher were, even at that time, antiquated. While sympathizing heartily with the purpose of the paper, it served then as now to confirm my belief that the best teachers of English in the secondary schools have not adequately appreciated the importance of historical English grammar as essential to an explanation of present usage.

In the first place, the teaching of historical English grammar would show a reason for what is now simply asserted. Present usage depends on past usage. It is neither set up by schoolmasters nor is it inherently best. It is a development under various influences. Now I am sure that much of the dryness of the subject would disappear if some attempt were made to explain how things came to be. Some attempts have indeed been made, but they have usually been from a psychological,

rather than an historical standpoint. An example of the latter may be found in the elaborate explanations of the use of *shall* and *will* in modern English. Not one of these psychological explanations begins with the facts of usage in the past, and then tries to show what processes of the folk-mind have been involved in the various changes that have taken place. Yet it is axiomatic that facts should precede attempts to explain them, and in all such cases the facts of older usage are immediately and vitally connected with usage of the present.

A consideration of historical English grammar would put an end to most of the profitless discussions which occupy the time of teachers' conventions, or find space in newspapers and less scholarly literary journals. Such discussions almost invariably consider the expression or usage in question from the logical standpoint only. Now language is essentially not logical but conventional. It represents not what ought to be, but what has come to be under certain natural or artificial influences. The historical factor, therefore, becomes of primary importance in considering correctness of present usage.

Many illustrations of this fact might be given. On a purely logical basis no one can support the modern English "I have come," rather than "I am come." The history of usage, however, shows how "have" has naturally taken its place as the only correct auxiliary for expressing a particular tense of the verb. In considering the correctness or incorrectness of such an expression as "I am granted permission," the history of usage and the past and present influences of analogy must not be so totally disregarded as they were by the literary journals which devoted much space to the above expression during the past year.

More than all else, a proper regard for the history of the language must show the importance of separating the usage of different periods, and the impossibility of explaining the usage of one period by influences belonging wholly to another era. English grammar in the schools of today should be a description of the usage of this century, as distinct in many respects from

that of the seventeenth or even eighteenth century. I note with pleasure that one recent text-book lays special emphasis upon this point, the author choosing examples from present English writers, admitting much diversity of usage, and not attempting to explain the usage of former times by that of today.

Not only should English grammar be taught with reference to the nature of language and the history of English, but it should also take account of the spoken, as distinct from the written, form. The reasons for this seem to me many and excellent. For instance, it is a misfortune that the English language makes its appeal to the educated mind, mainly through the written or printed form. The appeal to the ear and the appeal to the eye, which should strengthen one another, are thus distinctly separate and divergent. Our orthography encourages this separation. It is therefore the more important that text-books of grammar should make some attempt to counteract this tendency.

In accordance with this principle, text-books should describe the grammar of our language in terms which apply to the spoken as well as to the written form. That this is not done at present is fairly evident. Let anyone try, for example, to get an idea of the formation of the plural in spoken English from the descriptions of most of our school grammars. The same disregard of the spoken forms is exemplified by descriptions of the formation of the preterit tense. In these cases little confusion is produced in spoken English, because little attention is paid to the grammatical description. But it would be impossible to determine from most books what is the correct spoken form for the possessive singular of words ending in *s*, a case in which spoken usage greatly differs. The most serious effect of the neglect of the spoken form is the aid which it gives to the so-called orthoëpist in his conspiracy to force pronunciation into conformity with print.

Again, the grammarian should consider, not only spoken forms, but also spoken usage. Let me illustrate what I mean by an example taken almost at random. In one of our recent

text-books occurs this statement: "The term *verb* is from the Latin *verbum* meaning *word*: hence it is *the* word of the sentence. A thought cannot be expressed without a verb." I pass over the faulty logic of the proposition, that because verb meant "word" in Latin it must be *the* word in an English sentence. Etymology is important, but it is not as important as this implies. Besides this lack of sequence in the logic, the statement is only partly true for written English, since sentences without verbs do occur occasionally in good writers; and for the spoken language it is far from true, since sentences without verbs occur in the speech of each one of us every day. Of course the grammarian gets round the difficulty by saying that "when the child says 'Apple!' it means, See the apple! or, I have an apple." But in thus explaining the exception to his self-established rule, the grammarian is dealing with a logical, not a grammatical, fact. Grammar deals with what is, not what may be, expressed. Of slight importance as is this particular example, it is but one of many indications of an almost total neglect of spoken variations from written usage.

Consideration of spoken English implies some attention to phonology, or phonetics, a subject often though not always omitted in our text-books. This, however, would certainly not be unwise, especially in a nation so devoted to the dictionary and to what we call good spoken English. If phonology should be properly discussed by our grammarians we might hope some time to get rid of the misleading alphabetic description of sounds, which hinders more than it helps correct pronunciation.

But the best reason for the recognition of the spoken, as distinct from the written, language is in the enlivening and vivifying of grammatical teaching which would result. Instead of memorizing numerous rules and definitions, and applying them in a more or less lifeless manner to the conventional written form, the pupil could be taught to observe speech about him, to study its forms as the scientist studies other natural phenomena, and to understand the laws of its existence and development. I cannot believe that English studied in this way need be less

lacking in interest and pleasure than the study of the other phenomena of nature and of life.

In conclusion let me say two things. First, in criticising text-books and teaching of the subject, I am not necessarily criticising teachers of English. They are faithful, talented, often overworked and unable to do more than is now done. My implied criticism of present methods is really prompted by the hope that, in the near future, English will be placed on a better footing in all our schools, will be reckoned, as it certainly is not today, with foreign languages, ancient and modern, dead and living, with mathematics which has long had such a firm hold, and with the sciences which have assumed so important a place. And yet let us not lay flattering unction to our souls. I know of no subject which so urgently needs teachers of special rather than general education, teachers who are alive to the newest advances in linguistic science, teachers who, in special training as well as in special adaptability, deserve to rank with their coworkers in Greek and Latin, German and French. The great cry of secondary school teachers is for more methods. After some experience in schools of all grades, I am more and more inclined to believe that more special knowledge is the principal need. At least if this be true of any subject in the curriculum, it is true of English.

Secondly, it has been my purpose to speak from the standpoint, not so much of the secondary teacher, as of the specialist in English, so far as I may be permitted to represent him. If the specialist wishes to correct or modify what has been said, both you and I must hear him gladly. But if the suggestions as to treatment are based on fundamental principles of the science, then teachers in the secondary schools, as in all others, must follow them essentially. The cry "It is not practical," which is too often raised, ought never to be sufficient answer to what is accepted as sound and important. Sound learning is not incompatible with the practical in any department of knowledge.

Let me correct one misapprehension that may arise from some of my last words. When I spoke of the standpoint of the

secondary teacher and the specialist, it may have occurred to you that I wished to mark a great gulf. I had no such intention. There ought to be no such gulf; there must be none. The teacher of English in secondary schools must have the thorough training of the specialist, must be a scholar and an investigator. Then the time will come when, as suggested in a recent article by a professor of this University, the secondary school teacher will attend such a convention as this, not to discuss methods alone, but to bring his offering to the treasures of sound learning by widening, in however small a degree, the boundaries of knowledge.

Ought I to answer another question? Someone may ask "How can a man make a twenty-minute paper on English grammar and not mention the diagram?" I have mentioned the diagram and all other such devices. You will find them between the lines.

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